

Awaiting the return of the loons

by Elizabeth Jozwiak

One of the great signs of spring is watching the ice leaving the lakes and the loons returning to nest and raise their young. This summer you may see lake residents observing loons on some of the local from Kasilof to Nikiski, and on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

These newly dubbed “Loon Rangers” are participating in the Kenai Loon Watch project. They will be monitoring loon behavior and biology from a non-obtrusive distance as part of the Alaska Loon Watch Program. The data collected by Kenai Loon Watch volunteers will give biologists baseline information on the status of loons and their nesting success on lakes in our area.

Participation in the Loonwatch program for the Kenai area has increased substantially. In 2000, there were 16 loon watchers who reported their observations of loons on 36 area lakes as well as the Kenai River. Thirteen lakes had breeding common loons, and 10 lakes had loons whose eggs made it to the hatching stage. Seventeen chicks hatched and 16 chicks survived through the summer. Only two lakes reported finding reproductive pairs of Pacific loons. One lake had a Pacific loon pair that hatched eggs, and one of the two chicks survived.

Although Alaska has healthy populations of loons statewide, there are some concerns about the future of loons in areas that are heavily used by people. Fortunately, studies in other states have shown that loons and people can coexist if care is taken.

Ingestion of lead fishing sinkers is the single largest cause of mortality for adult loons in New England. Little information is known on how lead affects loons on the Kenai Peninsula, and more research is needed. But we do know that bald eagles on the Kenai Peninsula have become poisoned from ingesting lead. Ecologically safe alternatives to lead sinkers such as steel and bismuth are now readily available at cost-comparable prices to lead sinkers and can be pur-

chased in a variety of styles, shapes, weights, and sizes to meet every type of fishing need.

Entanglement in fishing line is yet another hazard to loons. I removed a ball of monofilament line from a loon last summer, and tried to get a fishhook out of the leg of a common loon on the Kenai River two summers ago. There are several things you can do this summer to help keep Kenai loons healthy and productive:

- Pick up discarded fishing line and tackle.
- Enjoy loons from a safe distance. If you see a loon rising out of the water, running and splashing across the surface, you are too close. If the adult loon has been scared off its nest, the eggs can chill and die or be eaten by a predator.
- Stay clear of loons and their nesting areas while boating, canoeing, or water skiing. Wakes can destroy their shoreline nests and drown chicks.
- Keep dogs leashed and confined. Loose dogs and other animals can destroy nests and eggs along lakeshores.
- Join the Kenai Loon Watch project and become a “Loon Ranger.” Contact the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge at 262-7021 for more information.

Tamara Mills, the Alaska Loonwatch Coordinator will present a slide show on the biology, behavior and life history of loons at 7:00pm, Friday, April 27 at the Kenai Peninsula College, Room 132. Please join us!

Elizabeth Jozwiak is a wildlife biologist at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. She also coordinates the local Kenai Loonwatch effort. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call 262-7021 or see the website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.